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Chirac told Syria was framed

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PARIS — French Premier Jacques Chirac was informed by West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher that Syria was not involved in the plane bomb incident that was aborted by alert security guards at London airport April 17.

Mr. Kohl and Mr. Genscher told Mr. Chirac that their conclusion was that the near-disaster in London was a provocation organized jointly by Israel's Mossad intelligence service and renegade elements in Syrian President Hafez Assad's entourage.

The objective, as Mr. Chirac understands it, was to embarrass President Assad and bring down his regime.

Britain broke diplomatic ties with Syria on Oct. 25, saying it had evidence that Syria masterminded the attempted bombing and supplied the explosives. Britain's decision followed a London jury's conviction of Jordanian-born Nezar Hindawi, sentenced to 45 years in prison for trying to place the bomb aboard an Israeli airliner by hiding it in a suitcase carried by his unsuspecting Irish fiancée.

Mr. Chirac, in a lengthy interview in French with this reporter on Tuesday, agreed that his views be made public though he did not wish to be quoted directly. Mr. Chirac's views appear here as summarized. The 90-minute exchange was tape-recorded with Mr. Chirac's knowledge.

If the London bomb — which had been handed by Hindawi to his pregnant fiancée, Ann Marie Murphy, just before she boarded an El Al flight to Israel — had exploded in mid-air, 376 people would have been killed. This presumably would have triggered the kind of retaliatory action against Syria that — according to what Mr. Chirac said the West German leaders had told him — would have caused the collapse of the Assad regime.

Mr. Chirac pooh-poohed evidence produced by Britain's intelligence services with a shrug of his shoulders and a dismissal of all Western intelligence services as worthless. He believes they have all been penetrated by moles — from the CIA to France's own DGSE. But he conceded he did not know the real truth about the London incident as he had not seen the complete dossier of the case.

German leaders, however, believe that the plotters, whoever they were, had instructed Hindawi to report to the Syrian Embassy after delivering the bomb to his girlfriend. This, in turn, was designed to compromise the Syrian government.

Mr. Chirac indicated that he shared German skepticism. He has talked to people who know the former Syrian ambassador to London, Loutof Haydar, who was expelled by Britain after the Hindawi verdict. And he said they were all convinced that Mr. Haydar is the kind of diplomat who would never accept being part of any terrorist plot and that the British accusation is implausible.

Mr. Chirac described the many different Syrian secret services as a can of worms and expressed the view that some of President Assad's enemies, both foreign and domestic, may be manipulating some of these agents against him.

The French premier does not doubt that Syria has sponsored a number of terrorist actions, either directly or indirectly, but that France has no evidence whatsoever that Syria was implicated in any terrorist incident on French soil. But to sever diplomatic realtions with Syria, as Britain did following the Hindawi verdict, is tantamount to barking in the dark.

In the judgment of the man who is the conservative front-runner to succeed President Francois Mitterrand in the 1988 elections, Syria remains the key to a peaceful solution in Lebanon. So to refuse to deal with Mr. Assad and to try to exclude Syria from the solution would be an act of diplomatic folly.

There is only one ticking bomb the Western world should be alarmed about — the spread of virulently anti-Western Moslem fundamentalism throughout the Middle East. Next to this, Mr. Chirac thinks, the terrorist bombs that explode in Western capitals are mere fire-crackers.

Mr. Chirac argued that since the United States and its allies do not have the political and military will to act decisively and collectively to subdue the states that sponsor terrorism, the only sensible alternative is to talk and deal with them.

The United States, after all, is now reported to be dealing with Iran, a country that regards the United States as the abominable Satan, even offering the Khomeini regime military spare parts as a gesture of friendship. France, on the other hand, is not selling arms to Syria. Reports to the contrary, he said, are pure disinformation.

When he became premier after his party won the March 16 national election, Mr. Chirac learned that France had signed two arms contracts with Syria in 1982 and 1984. He ordered their suspension. French arms sales to Iraq, Syria's erstwhile rival in the region and an ally of Iran, have continued without interruption since the mid-70s and throughout the Iran-Iraq war.

This reporter pointed out to Mr. Chirac that when the United States demonstrated the will to act and ordered air strikes against Libya last April 14, France refused overflight permission for U.S. bombers. Mr. Chirac categorized these U.S. strikes as totally counterproductive.

If Libyan strongman Col. Muammar Qaddafi was relatively quiescent last spring and summer, Mr. Chirac explained, it was because he had a serious problem with his own army, and it was not in any way related to the U.S. raid.

The Libyan military had been shaken to its foundations by Col. Qaddafi's ongoing and ill-fated military adventure in neighboring Chad, according to Mr. Chirac's information, and the Libyan leader had even felt compelled to execute his own cousin, Col. Hassan Ishkal. The cousin was one of his close cronies, a leader of his own tribe and a comrade-in-arms since the first day of the revolution in 1969.

France sent elite troops to Chad twice in three years to check Libyan intervention and requested and received U.S. logistical support for these operations.

Col. Qaddafi, Mr. Chirac explained, made the same mistake, albeit on a smaller scale, as Iraq's President Saddam Hussein when he attacked Iran in 1980. Mr. Chirac had heard about Iraq's plans a few days ahead of time, and since he had known Mr. Hussein well for several years, he sent him a secret message begging him to cease and desist.

The Iraqi leader replied that his own intelligence indicated the Iranian army was thoroughly demoralized, that the Arab minority in Iran would rise up and greet the Iraqis with open arms, and that it would all be over in a week.

And what happened after more than six years of carnage? Mr. Chirac asked.

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Saddam Hussein, he feels, rendered a tremendous service to his enemy Ayatollah Khomeini by helping him consolidate his regime, by creating the kind of regional destabilization that suits the Soviet Union, and radicalizing the spread of fundamentalism from the Gulf to the Atlantic.

By the same token, the Americans, with farcical air strikes against Libya, merely retarded the destabilization of Mr. Qaddafi's regime and enabled the mercurial colonel to remobilize his restless army and people against the United States, he said.

Mr. Chirac believes such actions as the U.S. air strikes undermine the moderate pro-Western regimes of the Arab world, which are dangerously fragile and vulnerable. Public opinion in the souks and bazaars of these countries invariably identify with what it perceives to be the Arab victim.

It is in the interest of all Western countries to nurture and safeguard the moderate countries like Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, the Gulf states, Morocco and Tunisia, he said.

That should be the common Western objective, beginning with the restoration of a peaceful Lebanon, which must, by definition, be worked out in cooperation with Syria, Mr. Chirac said. But such a policy will have to remain balanced precariously on the foundations of an easily aroused Arab public opinion, which is only too willing to be fanaticized by calls to Holy War.

All the more reason, Mr. Chirac explained, for Western countries to refrain from fanning the flames.

Mr. Chirac pointed out that despite the fact that Iraq was the aggressor against Iran, all other Arab countries closed ranks with Iraq. Their principal concern now is to prevent an Iranian victory and a fundamentalist stampede that would sweep away all the West's moderate friends.

But Mr. Chirac sees Britain, Israel and the United States helping Iran and digging a deeper grave for Western civilization. So when he is accused of lack of solidarity over the latest incident in London, he cannot restrain sarcasm over the cynicism of his allies.

Still, Mr. Chirac is confident that when France meets again with its European Community partners Monday, wiser counsels will prevail. He believes a common position toward terrorism in general and toward Syria in particular will emerge.

The French premier has informed President Assad that if he ever comes upon evidence that Syria has been involved in acts of terrorism in Europe, France's reaction will not be a verbal one. He did not elaborate on what other means would be used.